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Rhizomatic Curation: The 2nd Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince.

“How about completely abolishing the model of the biennial, so as to reopen the possibility of perceiving and bringing into focus the small, the overlooked, the locally produced, and the unclassifiable?” (Wulfen 106)

Contemporary art exhibitions today are characterized not by their use of small forms, but rather by a striving for global dimensions. The Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince is no exception, but at the same time it remains capable of making visible the overlooked, the locally produced and usually unclassified. The Haitian artist collective ‘Atis Rezistans’ collaborated with British photographer and curator Leah Gordon to “reclaim the mechanisms of exhibition practice on their own terms” (Savage 492) and hosted an international event to participate actively in the global art sphere.

The formation of the Ghetto Biennale was a direct response to Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of the homo viator that defines art today as a “journey-form, made of lines drawn both in space and time, materializing trajectories rather than destinations” (Bourriaud). The artist today as seen by Bourriaud, has become the “prototype of the contemporary traveler”. This concept was quite offensive for a group of artists (and the majority of the world’s population) who are living in a slum. In
Port-au-Prince persons do not have the financial liberty to “wander in geography”.

As a result the Biennale emerged in 2009 and connected the Haitian artists from lower classes to an international artistic audience. Attracted by its attempt to decentralize art and its non-elitist charm, I became part of the organizational staff in the second edition in 2011 and assisted Leah Gordon and André Eugéne with the curation. Two different models of exhibition framed the 2nd Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince: first the exhibition “Nouvo Rezistans” in the Institut Français that kicked off the Biennale and secondly the Biennale exhibition itself, which was embedded in the neighborhood near the Gran-Rue. The exhibition ‘Nouvo Rezistans’ was held in the inner courtyard of the Institut Français and presented 14 emerging artists from the collective who have not been shown before. The well-known representatives of the group, André Eugéne and Jean-Henry Celeur stepped back to allow sculptors like Jean Claude Saintlouis and Racine Polycarpe to find bigger recognition. The limited space of the courtyard required the decision to reduce the diverse and rich artistic positions of the collective to a minimum. The main goal of this exhibition was to reach a Haitian audience that is not willing to visit the slums around the Grand Rue and to present the group ‘Atis Rezistans’ through their varied individual, creative positions. While the exhibition ‘Nouvo Rezistans’ was embedded in a more classical curatorial practice, the Biennale exhibition itself rose above those typical strategies of selecting objects and mediating them through a curatorial gaze. While we as curators remain here embroiled in the legacy of Western art discourses of presenting art, the Biennale exhibition became something less staged and designed that can be labeled as rhizomatic curation. The exhibition near the Gran-Rue presented contemporary art directly and indirectly as an oscillation between different artistic poles and genres, which is perhaps best described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s metaphorical concept of the rhizome. The rhizome is a horizontal network of roots. Any point in this system can be connected freely to any other point. The rhizome is thereby a non-centered, non-hierarchical and non-significant system that is solely defined by a circulation of states. There are no clear dualities but diversity and multiplicities. The Biennale exhibition was equally open, non-centered and allowed a free circulation.

The yard and temporary exhibition space in front of André Eugéne’s atelier. The huge statue is of Papa Gede, a Vodou spirit, and was built by André Eugéne and Louko.

Photo Credit: Meliza Jean
of signs. The initial idea for the exhibition was to integrate the international art works in the environment of the neighborhood and to open up and display the multiplicity of Haitian artists’ ateliers in this area. Therefore, visitors were given a map and invited to wander through the neighborhood to see all participating artists. A conceptual installation like Allison Rowe’s project ‘Aid for USA and Canada’, could be found in the exhibition site in the neighborhood as well as a ceremonial vèvè for the Vodou deity Ezili done coincidently by hounkan and artist Papa Da on the day of the exhibition. The socio-cultural, plastic sculptures by Gëtho Jean Baptiste stood parallel to handicrafts by local welders and carvers, who have their studios in the same area and produce for tourist markets in Santo Domingo. In this complex and rhizomatic structure, the lines between ethnographic artifacts, contemporary art objects and tourist-art are blurred. They all exist side by side without an educational authority that needs to present on plinths, what is worthy to be seen and what is not. By promoting relations the Biennale exhibition maintained that diversity is getting opaque and thereby refusing the incorporation into hierarchical systems of knowing.

The strongest artworks embedded in the Ghetto Biennale exhibition were in my opinion the ones, where foreign and Haitian artists collaborated on equal terms, for example Canadian mixed-media pop artist Karen Miranda Augustine, who collaborated with Haitian drapo vodou maker Mary Ketty Paul. Karen and Ketty were sewing several paket congo to honor female members of the community in the project ‘The Three Erzulies’. Less effective were those where the artists defined their artistic practices as a beneficial gift’ to people from a socially deprived area. Perhaps the simplest and most beautiful work presented in the Biennale was done by Lithuanian artist Jūratė Jarulytė, who collaborated with local Rosé Marie Paul on her project ‘Palē svem, kalbek su manimi’ /’talk to me’. Rosé Marie and Jūratė spent several days together and tried to find a means of nonverbal communication. Rosé Marie is not able to speak English or Lithuanian and Jūratė cannot speak Creole. On the day of the opening both met again, went to the market and decided to cook a meal together: “I really think this led to a deeper communication. There is something amazing about those (language) patterns in human minds. I think people felt that too when they ate our food that was a
result of our communication” (Personal communication with Jurate Jarulyte, January, 17th 2012). This ephemeral project could not be exhibited, although people were invited to share the meal on the day of the opening and the artwork can only be found in the interaction and communication between Jurate and Rosé Marie.

The notion of an anti-hierarchical ideal cannot be entirely fulfilled as bringing the first and second world together interrupts longstanding dialectics of power. To defuse this tension Leah Gordon is planning for the next edition to strengthen the intra-Caribbean and Latin American connections and also to offer international artists from lower classes the possibility to participate in the project. This ambitious concept requires a lot of funding and will not be easily achieved. The idea was already indirectly visualized by the joint photo-project by Piroska Kiss and Romel Jean Pierre. In a narrow corridor photos from a Haitian and a Hungarian ghetto were juxtaposed and gazed at one another. Perhaps in a future edition of the Biennial, this confrontation can evolve from a two-dimensional, documentary level to a real encounter. It could be an exciting project to bring Sinti and Roma artists from a Hungarian ghetto or a Brazilian Favela project like “Projeto Morrinho: Uma pequena revolução” to Port-au-Prince.

As Hou Hanrou argues, Bienales should not be simple ‘zones of contact’ but instead “zones of confrontation, negotiation and exchange with the alien” (Vogel 112). The focus of the Ghetto Biennale is on asymmetrical structures of power, which are often forgotten or overlooked in the elitist global art circuit. This asymmetry becomes highly visible in the direct interaction between “first world” and “third world” artist and the tension that springs from this encounter. The Ghetto Biennale cannot simply be reduced to two models of exhibition but is foremost a process and an experience that needs to be reflected and challenged continuously by all participating artists, international and Haitian. The Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince is a provocative and direct model that can easily be judged and criticized for its alleged closeness to ‘slum tourism’. I see it mainly as an open, flexible and reflexive experiment, which establishes a trans-cultural dialogue between “first” and “third world” artists. The Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince is narrowing the still existing gap between periphery and centre and is challenging boundaries: boundaries between curated and curating cultures, between contemporary art objects and ethnographic artifacts and also between home water and artists, who are still bound to their home countries. The founders of this rhizomatic experiment, Leah Gordon and André Eugène, do not assume they have all of the answers. However, they are asking salient and provocative questions about race and class in a globalized art world: “what happened when first world art rubs against third world art? Does it bleed?” (Call for Submissions Ghetto Bienalle 2009) - Yes, it does. But only in a true confrontation and an earnest negotiation with the foreign can the locally produced, the unclassifiable and the overlooked, become visible again.

Works Cited


About the Author:

David Frohnapfel is a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin and a fellow of the Max-Planck-Research Group ‘Objects in the Contact Zone - The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things’ in Florence. In his dissertation project he is comparing the autonomous Ghetto-museums and off-spaces of Haitian artists Jean Claude Saintilus and Papa Da with ‘Euroamerican’ strategies of presenting their art works in museum exhibitions. His main research is about Contemporary ‘Caribbean’ art and the fracture zones between art and religion in the Caribbean space.